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ABSTRACT

A caring reading curriculum is needed to help children learn to care for others while promoting academic success in reading, thereby satisfying both the academic and social purposes of education. In developing or evaluating a caring reading curriculum, certain aspects of the program must be considered. These aspects are classroom environment, reading material, tasks and activities, and models of caring persons. The goal in the classroom environment is to maximize interpersonal content. Students are grouped heterogeneously so that students of various ability levels can work together. Materials need to be considered in terms of the social messages, if any, they present to students. Students should be exposed to materials in which the main characters are motivated by prosocial and altruistic interests. Teachers should find ways to involve students in collaborative reading tasks, working with others within and outside the classroom. In a caring reading curriculum, students should see caring personified in the daily actions of their teacher and other significant visitors to the classroom. The development of socially responsible citizens should be an important component of any reading curriculum or generic instruction system. (Seventeen references are attached.) (MM)

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ASPECTS OF A CARING READING CURRICULUM

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Education in America has traditionally maintained two basic mandates : one academic, the other social (Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Schools, 1918; Levine and Haselkorn, 1984; Wynne and Walberg, 1985). The first mandate is the education of the young in academic skills that will enable them to lead productive lives. Reading, obviously, is one academic skill that schools teach in order to fulfill this responsibility.

The second mandate for American schools is the development of prosocial attitudes and behavioral dispositions. This goal reflects the ideal of a caring citizenry, concerned, not only for the well-being of self, but also for the welfare of others (Jeffreys, 1971; Wynne, 1985). Reading and reading education, being social phenomena (Bloome, 1985; Templeton, 1986), present fertile soil for the fulfillment of both mandates in the schools.

The American educational system has, in general, addressed the academic purpose of education to the benign neglect of the socialization purpose (Rasinski, 1984b). Educational curricula have been developed that attempt to lead students to "mastery" of academic content and skills. In the quest for this goal students are often placed in social environments that have little resemblence to the one for which they will enter outside of school. Moreover they are kept from social tasks and activities that may help them develop prosocial dispositions.

This situation is true for reading. In many schools the need to have students achieve well on standardized reading tests has resulted in the development of school reading programs that, at

best, are neutral in the fostering of prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Rasinski & Nathenson-Mejia, 1987). Motivation through public ridicule, or intensive competition, attention focusing by physical isolation, reading skill development through the use of materials having little socially redeeming content, and maximizing academic engaged time by having students always work alone are ways in which some school reading programs have addressed the need for academic excellence in the reading curriculum. It seems apparent that in such programs schools are not addressing the full range of students' needs. Indeed, students coming from such programs may be fully capable of reading but may have difficulty adjusting to life in the larger society and contributing to the welfare of their communities.

A Caring Reading Curriculum

What is needed is a caring reading curriculum; a reading program that helps children learn to care for others while at the same time promoting academic success in reading. An optimal reading program is one that seeks to satisfy both purposes of education. A caring reading curriculum helps to insure that programmatic changes to enhance the academic achievement of students are not made at the expense of the socialization aspects of the curriculum.

In attempting to develop a caring reading curriculum or in evaluating the caring quality of an existing reading program certain aspects of the program must be considered. These aspects are classroom environment, reading material, tasks and activities, and models of caring persons. Each of these aspects will be discussed in terms of their potential contribution to a caring reading curriculum.

Classroom Environment

The classroom is the place where students spend a majority of the day for nine months of the year. The important question to be considered is does the classroom environment offer students opportunities to interact with one another visually, verbally, and physically? In order to learn to care students must be given opportunities and space to be together so that they can see, talk, and work with each other. In a caring reading program desks might be arranged in groups of four to six in which students face each other. This is in contrast to the traditional rows of seats in which students only see the back of the head of the child in front of them.

In a caring reading curriculum little attempt is made to isolate students using walls or dividers. The goal is to maximize interpersonal contact. Students are grouped heterogeneously so that students of various ability levels can work together, each contributing his or her own unique talents. In a caring reading curriculum one will often find a comfortable reading commons area where students can gather to read alone or in groups. An old couch or a soft rug with pillows invites students to come together.

Reading Materials

In a caring reading curriculum the materials need to be considered in terms of the social messages, if any, they present to students. In his study of award winning books for children Shannon (1986) found that most books portrayed the main character in a self-serving role as opposed to a role in which the character's

actions were for the benefit of others or the community at large. Certainly in a caring reading curriculum students will be exposed to materials in which the main characters are motivated by prosocial and altuistic interests. And, when students read about characters who appear driven by self-interest the classroom discussion will focus on the source of character motivation.

Academic Tasks and Activities

Perhaps the most important aspect of the reading curriculum involves what the students are asked to do. This is also true in a caring reading curriculum. The caring reading curriculum is marked by students working cooperatively in groups on shared projects and activities. Groups of students will be assigned tasks for which the group itself will bear responsibility. In many cases the groups will be made up of students from a wide variety of levels. Research by Robert Slavin (1983) and David and Roger Johnson (1984) provide generic models of cooperative group learning that promote both the academic and socialization goals of education. Perhaps the easiest method of involving students in cooperative group activities is by having them read together and discuss real books for children. Hepler and Hickman (1982) described the groups of readers that evolved in their classroom observations as communities of readers as students learned to share insights, personal reflections and the actual reading task with one another.

In a caring reading curriculum students might also be paired. These pairs of students work together, listening, monitoring, evaluating, and providing feedback on each other's reading. Here,

too, models of cooperative dyads in reading instruction exist and have been found to be highly successful (Boraks & Allen, 1977; Koskinen & Blum, 1986; Larson & Dansereau, 1986). Bialogue journals are another way for students to use literacy to develop personal and caring relationships with one another or with the teacher.

In all forms of grouping, the teacher, in the caring reading curriculum, must pay close attention to the dynamics of the group. The teacher will not allow the makeup of the groups to remain static. Groups and pairs will be reformed several times throughout the year so that students get to know and work closely with a wide variety of individuals, especially those with whom they might not otherwise associate.

In a caring reading curriculum students will also be given opportunities to use their literacy skills to help others outside their own classroom. Cross-age tutoring (Nevi, 1983), for example, allows older readers to work with and help younger, less able readers. Research suggests that both members of the dyad benefit academically. Students can also be paired with older members of the general community. In a study reported by Rasinski (1984a) middle grade students were paired with residents of a retirement village. Together, the pairs worked through several literacy related projects, such as conducting an interview and writing up an oral history of the older partner, that both partners found interesting and satisfying.

By being involved in situations which require students to cooperate with others in order to successfully fulfill an academic

requirement, students find empathy and friendship with others and learn to give and accept help. At the same time they are practicing reading skills that will enable them to gain proficiency and independence in reading.

Models of Caring People

A caring reading curriculum would be rather sterile if the students did not have any real life examples of what it meant to live out one's life in a caring way. The teacher needs to be the prime model of how caring is enacted in a person's life.

In a caring reading curriculum the students will recognize the teacher as a source of encouragement and help. Students will not be afraid to ask for assistance from the teacher, knowing that she or he will give it without condition and in abundance. Although the teacher may find the duties of teaching to be stressful, he or she will attempt to deal with each student with patience regardless of how exasperating and repetitive some students questions and requests for help may be.

The teacher will talk to and discuss with the class about what it means to be a caring person. This may be a discussion that follows the reading of a story on sharing or, conversely, on selfishness. On, it may be leading a talk, role play, or reader's theater play about the social skills that lend themselves to caring and cooperating situations.

The teacher in a caring reading curriculum may also ask parents and other volunteers to come to the class in order to work with less able readers or to share a special book or experience with the

class. The teacher will help the class see that these visitors are coming as helpers. This may be an opportunity to talk about the importance of being helped and cared for and the ways in which people being helped can respond.

The purpose of this paper is not to diminish the academic goal of reading instruction. Rather, the paper attempts to make the point that reading instruction that focuses only the academic aspects of reading instruction may not be optimal in terms of the overall benefits to students.

A second goal of schooling is the development of citizenship or social responsibility in students. Reading educators need to realize that to learn to read in a context devoid of thoughtfully planned social learning and interaction is a less than notable achievement.

Reading instruction offers educators excellent opportunities to develop curricula that help children learn to care for one another while simultaneously becoming readers. Four aspects of creating or evaluating a caring reading curricula were suggested. A reading curriculum for caring provides an environment that invites group activity. In a caring reading curriculum students read and discuss stories that involve examples of prosocial, and also self-centered behavior. Teachers find ways, in a caring reading curriculum, to involve students in reading tasks that involve working with others within and outside the classroom. And, in a caring reading curriculum, students see caring personified in the daily actions of their teacher and other significant visitors to the classroom.

Surely other aspects of a caring reading curriculum can be considered. However, the four aspects discussed here offer a starting point for the serious consideration of making the development of socially responsible citizens an important component of any reading curriculum or generic instructional system.

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